



IOWA

PROFILES IN soil health

Lin Sorenson
Wright County, Iowa
160 acres
Corn and Soybeans
Planting: Oats and Tillage Radishes

unlock the
SECRETS
IN THE
SOIL

Lin Sorenson Wrote Conservation Into Her Lease.

Linda “Lin” Sorenson says the income from land she inherited from her father is an enormous blessing, and she’s made a point of educating herself on how to care for it as long as she lives. Building the soil with cover crops has become a central part of that care.

“I inherited the land in 2006—I’ll never sell it,” says Sorenson of her 160 acres of productive farmland in Wright County, Iowa. “I absolutely want to keep it, and I want to be a good steward while I have it.”

“My father, Harold, grew up on a farm in Wright County. He chose a career in the U.S. Navy, but he always had a love for the land,” Sorenson says. “He bought the land in the 1960’s when I was growing up, when we lived in the south side of Des Moines.”



A busy work schedule and a farm that’s 2 hours away has limited Lin Sorenson’s time on the farm. But she’s so excited about cover crops that she planted the same tillage radish and oats cover crop in the back yard at her home, just to monitor progress.

Sorenson has a strong conservation ethic, one she thinks is related to her love of animals. She founded and is the director of St. Francis Foundation for Pets, with a mission of preventing companion animal cruelty through education, outreach and legislation. She works with prosecutors to educate them on the proven link between cruelty to animals and violence against people. She believes caring for animals and caring for land are linked, and she's passionate about both.

"The technology that allows us to produce such high corn yields has surpassed the conservation practices we have in place," Sorenson says. "We're losing valuable topsoil, and chemicals and fertilizers are leaching into our water supplies. We need to incorporate conservation practices more to keep up with increasing demands for greater production—we shouldn't have one without the other."

Urges women to educate themselves in farm operations

Lin set about educating herself on the business of farming the first year she owned the farm. "If women want more control over how their land is farmed, I'd suggest they get personally involved," she says. "Start by going to going to classes—that's what I did the year I got the farm. Iowa State University Extension has programs and a wealth of information on all phases of farming. They have all the information on their website and they have the professors whose job it is to educate people. Their classes are only \$25 to \$30, and they have classes geared towards women landowners."

Written Lease Makes Conservation Intent Clear

Sorenson walks her land several times a year with her German shepherd, Noble, a pet therapy dog with two obedience titles. Her land is gently rolling, but still susceptible to soil erosion in a corn/soybean rotation. "I wanted a tenant that shared the same



Sorenson watches as an airplane drops a cover crop mix of oats and tillage radishes in September.

goals I have for the land," Sorenson explains. "I have that now in Kevin Burres from Eagle Grove. I was impressed the first time I contacted him, when he said right off that he would use no-till farming on my farm. He also loves animals; that was important to me, too. He's no-tilled my farm the entire time he's rented it."

Sorenson and Burres use a written lease that spells out how conservation practices will be used and maintained. It's a flexible lease developed by ISU, with cash rent tied to the price of commodities. "If the price of commodities goes up, the second half of the rent payment goes up. If the price goes down, the second payment goes down," she explains.

Sorenson has been working with Burres for about 5 years. "I think Kevin is phenomenal," she says. "He's the one who introduced me to cover crops. He grew them on his own farm last year; we took advantage of the state of Iowa's incentives program for first time cover crop users to help pay for them," Sorenson says.

Sorenson planted DOVER—a mix of 90 percent oats and 10 percent tillage radish. "These will both winter kill, so we don't have to worry about using chemicals in the spring to kill them," says Sorenson. She lives two hours away from her farm, so can't watch the cover crops closely. To compensate in part and stay personally involved, she planted the same mix in her

back yard, so she could observe the plants growing daily.

She's also become more involved by interacting with people who are successful with cover crops. When the NRCS helped sponsor a cover crops workshop as part of the Iowa Power Show last winter, Sorenson was there. She took two days out of her work schedule to attend, asking lots of questions of the farmers and expert speakers.

"Lin contacted our office with an interest in cover crops," says Bruce Voigts, a project coordinator for NRCS in the Boone River Watershed. "She had done her research and decided it was the thing to do. She's now helping everyone learn by using strip trials to monitor their performance. There's no question she wants to take care of her soil the best ways she knows how."

Every farmer should be planting cover crops

As she's learned more about cover crops, Sorenson has become more convinced they have value in many ways. "I've learned that cover crops can do so many things," Sorenson says. "Some species break up soil compaction, for instance. Two things they do that I'm most interested in is increasing organic matter in the soil and mitigating against soil erosion. Both those things are part of keeping the soil healthy and productive."

"Cover crops can also scavenge nitrogen from the soil and release it later for corn or soybeans to feed on," she says. "That's important for water quality—Iowa has some of the dirtiest water in the country, and I don't want to be part of that. I think eventually we will be able to significantly decrease the need for chemical fertilizers on the farm by using cover crops."

Sorenson encourages other absentee landowners to consider cover crops for their farms. "If you do nothing else to get involved in better care of your land, start studying cover crops," she advises. "Cover crops have so many positives, I think every farmer should be planting them."



The DOVER cover crop mix—oats and tillage radish—was growing when Lin Sorenson and her dog Noble checked it in October after soybean harvest.

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